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Goodbye 'godsend': Expiration of child tax credits hits home

By J. RABY, F. HUSSEIN and J. BOAK

Associated Press

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — For the first time in half a year, families on Friday are going without a monthly deposit from the child tax credit — a program that was intended to be part of President Joe Biden's legacy but has emerged instead as a flash point over who is worthy of government support.

Retiree Andy Roberts, from St. Albans, West Virginia, relied on the checks to help raise his two young grandchildren, whom he and his wife adopted because the birth parents are recovering from drug addiction.

The Robertses are now out \$550 a month. That money helped pay for Girl Scouts, ballet and acting lessons and kids' shoes, which Roberts noted are more expensive than adult shoes. The tax credit, he said, was a "godsend."

"It'll make you tighten up your belt, if you've got anything to tighten," Roberts said about losing the payments.

The monthly tax credits were part of Biden's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package — and the president had proposed extending them for another full year as part of a separate measure focused on economic and social programs.



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Associated Press

LIVE ENTERTAINMENT 7 DAYS A WEEK

| SUNDAY: | MONDAY: | TUESDAY: | WEDNESDAY: | THURSDAY: | FRIDAY: | SATURDAY: |
|---|--|--|---|--|--|--|
| TICO KOCK STEEL DRUM 4 - 6pm | ANGELA FLORES VIOLINIST 6:30 - 8:30pm | JEAN PAUL SAXOPHONIST 6:30 - 8:30pm | PAULA RIDERSTAP SINGER 6:30 - 8:30pm | RICKY THOMAS GUITAR 7 - 9pm | RICKY THOMAS GUITAR 7 - 9pm | ANGELA FLORES VIOLINIST 6:30 - 8:30pm |
| PAULA RIDERSTAP SINGER 6:30 - 8:30pm | Happy Hour 12 - 1 / 4 - 6 / 9 - 10 | PREMIUM BRANDS ★★★ | KARAOKE HAPPY HOUR 9:00 - 11:00pm | WATER'S EDGE RESTAURANT & BAR | | |

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Locations: **The Cove Mall** (8:00 AM - 6:00 PM) **Medcare near Courtyard by Marriott** (8:00 AM - 2:00 PM)

Goodbye 'godsend': Expiration of child tax credits hits home

Continued from Front

But Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin, from Roberts' home state of West Virginia, objected to extending the credit out of concern that the money would discourage people from working and that any additional federal spending would fuel inflation that has already climbed to a nearly 40-year high.

According to IRS data, 305,000 West Virginia children benefited from the expanded credit last month. Manchin's opposition in the evenly split Senate derailed Biden's social spending package and caused the expanded tax credits that were going out in the middle of every month to expire in January. This is whittling down family incomes at the precise moment when people are grappling with higher prices.

However, families only received half of their 2021 credit on a monthly basis and the other half will be received once they file their taxes in the coming months. The size of the credit will be cut in 2022, with full payments only going to families that earned enough income to owe taxes, a policy choice that will limit the benefits for the poorest households. And the credits for 2022 will come only once people file their taxes at the start of

the following year.

West Virginia families interviewed by The Associated Press highlighted how their grocery and gasoline bills have risen and said they'll need to get by with less of a financial cushion than a few months ago.

"You're going to have to learn to adapt," said Roberts, who worked as an auto dealer for five decades. "You never really dreamed that everything would all of a sudden explode. You go down and get a package of hamburger and it's \$7-8 a pound."

By the Biden administration's math, the expanded child tax credit and its monthly payments were a policy success that paid out \$93 billion over six months. More than 36 million families received the payments in December. The payments were \$300 monthly for each child who was five and younger, and \$250 monthly for children between the ages of six and 17.

The Treasury Department declined to address questions about the expiration of the expanded child tax credit, which has become a politically sensitive issue as part of Biden's nearly \$2 trillion economic package that has stalled in the Senate.

Manchin has supported some form of a work requirement for people re-

ceiving the payment, out of concern that automatic government aid could cause people to quit their jobs. Yet his primary objection, in a written statement last month, sidestepped that issue as he expressed concerns about inflation and that a one-year extension masked the true costs of a tax credit that could become permanent.

"My Democratic colleagues in Washington are determined to dramatically reshape our society in a way that leaves our country even more vulnerable to the threats we face," Manchin said. He added that he was worried about inflation and the size of the national debt.

The Census Bureau surveyed the spending patterns of recipients during September and October. Nearly a third used the credit to pay for school expenses, while about 25% of families with young children spent it on child care. About 40% of recipients said they mostly relied on the money to pay off debt. There are separate benefits in terms of improving the outcomes for impoverished children, whose families could not previously access the full tax credit because their earnings were too low. An analysis by the Urban Institute estimated that extending the credit as developed by the Biden

administration would cut child poverty by 40%.

The tax credits did not cause an immediate exodus from the workforce, as some lawmakers had feared. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the percentage of people with jobs increased from 58% the month before the monthly payments began to 59.5% last month. That same trend occurred in West Virginia, where the employment-population ratio rose to the pre-pandemic level of 52.9%.

There's an academic debate over whether the credit could suppress employment in the long term, with most studies suggesting that the impact would be statistically negligible.

Academics who study the tax credit are torn on how a permanent program would affect the economy and child welfare.

Katherine Micheltore, an associate professor of public policy at the University of Michigan, and two other researchers estimated that roughly 350,000 parents would exit the workforce, a figure that is not all that significant in an economy with roughly 150 million jobs.

Micheltore said the long-term effects of a permanent tax credit would have a positive impact on the economy, as children who grow up in families with higher incomes "tend to

do better in school, they're more likely to graduate from high school. It might be 15 years down the road but there will be more cost savings in the future."

One of the key questions for policymakers is whether bureaucracies or parents are better at spending money on children. Manchin has proposed a 10-year, funded version of Biden's economic proposal that would scrap the child tax credits focus and instead finance programs such as universal pre-kindergarten, to avoid sending money directly to families.

"It's a moral question of do you trust families to make their own decisions," Micheltore said.

Hairdresser Chelsea Woody is a single mother from Charleston, West Virginia, who works six days a week to make ends meet. The extended child tax credit payments had helped pay for her son's daycare, as well as letting her splurge on clothes for him.

"It truly helps out a lot. It's an extra cushion, instead of me worrying how I'm going to pay a bill or if anything comes up," Woody said as she loaded groceries into her car. "It's helpful for a lot of people. It helps working families out because we struggle the most. I'm hardly home with my kid because I work all the time." □



Associated Press

By **MARK SHERMAN and JESSICA GRESKO**
Associated Press
WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court has stopped a major push by the Biden administration to boost the

nation's COVID-19 vaccination rate, a requirement that employees at large businesses get a vaccine or test regularly and wear a mask on the job. The court's conservative majority con-

Supreme Court halts COVID-19 vaccine rule for US businesses

cluded the administration overstepped its authority by seeking to impose the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's vaccine-or-test rule on U.S. businesses with at least 100 employees. More than 80 million people would have been affected and OSHA had estimated that the rule would save 6,500 lives and prevent 250,000 hospitalizations over six months.

"OSHA has never before imposed such a mandate. Nor has Congress. Indeed, although Congress has enacted significant legislation

addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, it has declined to enact any measure similar to what OSHA has promulgated here," the conservatives wrote in an unsigned opinion.

In dissent, the court's three liberals argued that it was the court that was overreaching by substituting its judgment for that of health experts. "Acting outside of its competence and without legal basis, the Court displaces the judgments of the Government officials given the responsibility to respond to workplace

health emergencies," Justices Stephen Breyer, Elena Kagan and Sonia Sotomayor wrote in a joint dissent.

President Joe Biden said he was "disappointed that the Supreme Court has chosen to block common-sense life-saving requirements for employees at large businesses that were grounded squarely in both science and the law."

Biden called on businesses to institute their own vaccination requirements, noting that a third of Fortune 100 companies already have done so. □

Owners to get \$42 million for citrus trees Florida destroyed

By MIKE SCHNEIDER

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — Sixteen years after their legal battle began, about 18,000 homeowners in central Florida will be paid more than \$42 million collectively by the state of Florida for destroying their citrus trees during an effort to eradicate a harmful citrus disease.

The homeowners in Orange County will receive about \$700 per healthy tree destroyed as part of an order issued in state court in Orlando last month. A judgment from a 2014 trial assessed the value of each healthy tree as \$344, but fees and interests over the years doubled the per-tree payment.

More than 60,000 healthy, uninfected trees were destroyed in Orange County between 2002 and 2006 as part of the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' efforts



Associated Press

to eradicate citrus canker, according to the lawsuit.

While unharmed to humans, citrus canker can cause the leaves and fruit of citrus trees to drop prematurely and create unappealing lesions on the

fruit. The lesions leak bacterial cells that can spread to other trees by wind, rain or contaminated equipment, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer

Services had argued that the homeowners' trees were a public nuisance and didn't have value worth compensating. Under the program, healthy trees that were within 1900 feet (580 meters) of an in-

fectured tree were destroyed in an effort to stop the disease's spread.

As compensation, the state in the 2000s offered Florida homeowners \$100 Walmart gift cards for their first destroyed tree and \$55 for each additional tree. In cases where homeowners resisted, authorities threatened arrest or obtained warrants to go onto private property and destroy trees. The Florida Legislature approved payments for the Orange County homeowners last year. A third-party administrator will distribute the checks and track down homeowners whose addresses are no longer current.

Tens of thousands of homeowners in Broward, Lee and Palm Beach counties won class action lawsuits against the state over their destroyed trees, and compensations varied by county. A case in Miami-Dade County is still pending. □

White House: Russia prepping pretext for Ukraine invasion

By A. MADHAN

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. intelligence officials have determined a Russian effort is underway to create a pretext for its troops to further invade Ukraine, and Moscow has already prepositioned operatives to conduct "a false-flag operation" in eastern Ukraine, according to the White House.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday the intelligence findings show Russia is also laying the groundwork through a social media disinformation campaign that frames Ukraine as an aggressor that has been preparing an imminent attack against Russian-backed forces in eastern Ukraine.

Psaki charged that Russia has already dispatched operatives trained in urban warfare who could use explosives to carry out acts of sabotage against Russia's own proxy forces — blaming the acts on Ukraine — if

Russian President Vladimir Putin decides he wants to move forward with an invasion. "We are concerned that the Russian government is preparing for an invasion in Ukraine that may result in widespread human rights violations and war crimes should diplomacy fail to meet their objectives," Psaki said.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby described the intelligence as "very credible." A U.S. official, who was not authorized to comment on the intelligence and spoke on condition of anonymity, said much of it was gleaned from intercepted communications and observations of the movements of people.

The U.S. intelligence findings, which were declassified and shared with U.S. allies before being made public, estimate that a military invasion could begin between mid-January and mid-February.

Ukraine is also monitoring the potential use of disin-

formation by Russia. Separately, Ukrainian media on Friday reported that authorities believed Russian special services were planning a possible false flag incident to provoke additional conflict.

The new U.S. intelligence was unveiled after a series of talks between Russia and the U.S. and its Western allies this week in Europe aimed at heading off the escalating crisis made little progress.

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan on Thursday said the U.S. intelligence community has not made an assessment that the Russians, who have massed some 100,000 troops on Ukraine's border, have definitively decided to take a military course of action.

But Sullivan said Russia is laying the groundwork to invade under false pretenses should Putin decide to go that route. He said the Russians have been planning "sabotage activities



Associated Press

and information operations" that accuse Ukraine of prepping for its own imminent attack against Russian forces in eastern Ukraine.

He said this is similar to what the Kremlin did in the lead-up to Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, the Black Sea peninsula that had been under Ukraine's jurisdiction since 1954.

Russia has long been accused of using disinformation as a tactic against adversaries in conjunction with military operations and cyberattacks. In 2014, Russian state media tried to discredit pro-Western protests in Kyiv as "fomented

by the U.S. in cooperation with fascist Ukrainian nationalists" and promoted narratives about Crimea's historical ties to Moscow, according to a report by Stanford University's Internet Observatory.

Efforts to directly influence Ukrainians appear to have continued during the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine, in which at least 14,000 people have died. The Associated Press reported in 2017 that Ukrainian forces in the east were constantly receiving text messages warning that they would be killed and their children would be made orphans. □

December retail sales fall 1.9% after early holiday rush

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO

AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Americans, beset by lack of product choices, rising prices and the arrival of omicron, sharply cut their spending in December after a burst of early buying in the fall boosted this year's holiday shopping season.

Retail sales fell a seasonally adjusted 1.9% in December from November when sales increased 0.3%, the U.S. Commerce Department said Friday. Sales rose 1.8% in October as shoppers, worried about product shortages, got a head start on their holiday buying. Still, retail sales surged 16.9% last month compared with December 2020, the Commerce Department said Friday. For all of 2021, sales spiked 19.3% compared with the previous year.

Spending declines were spread across numerous sectors. Department store sales fell 7%, restaurant sales slipped 0.8% and online sales fell 8.7% compared with the previous month, according to the report.

Omicron was identified by the World Health Organization in late November, and the December report from the Commerce Department is the first to capture some of its effect on consumer behavior.

The monthly retail report



Associated Press

covers only about a third of overall consumer spending and doesn't include money spent on things like haircuts, hotel stays or plane tickets, all which tend to see business tail off when anxiety about COVID-19 tick higher. In November, restaurant sales posted a 1% gain — the sector's best performance since July. Industry analysts suspect that shoppers who waited until the last minute and didn't find what they wanted and took a pass or they bought gift cards, would not show up in retail data until those cards are redeemed.

There is also the unique era

we living through that has skewed a number of economic indicators. Many economists believe that the seasonal adjustment of retail sales has been thrown off by the pandemic, which has scrambled American spending patterns. Seasonal adjustment is intended to account for the normal spike in shopping in December for the holiday season. This year, however, because of well-known shortages, Americans started to shop for the holidays early and the seasonal adjustment could have exaggerated any December retreat.

And Americans this year

have not pulled back on spending. They are spending their money differently, but they are spending more, not less.

The National Retail Federation is crunching last month's sales figures and will release its report Friday for November and December. The nation's largest retail trade group has projected record-busting growth of anywhere between 8.5% and 10.5%, compared with the same two months last year.

Mastercard SpendingPulse, which tracks all kinds of payments including cash and debit cards, reported late last month that holiday

sales surged 8.5% from Nov. 1 through Dec. 24 from a year earlier. That was the fastest pace in 17 years.

"Consumer spending will remain the cornerstone of economic growth this year, but the near-term path will be choppy amid surging Omicron cases," said Lydia Boussour, lead U.S. Economist at Oxford Economics. Boussour believes that after a soft patch in the first quarter, spending should rebound in the spring due to strong wage growth and savings.

Stephen Stanley, chief economist at Amherst Pierpoint, agreed, pointing to a strong labor market and massive pent-up demand and "a mountainous pile of extra cash to spend."

"People will spend again once the Omicron wave fades," Stanley predicted.

The omicron variant has led to widespread worker shortages with so people calling out sick, including the retail sector, and supply shortages have curtailed what makes it to store shelves. Stores and restaurants have slashed operating hours or remained closed on days they had previously been open. This week, Lululemon warned that fourth-quarter sales and profits will likely come in at the low end of its expectations as it grapples with the variant's fallout. □



Associated Press

By DAVE COLLINS Associated Press

LITCHFIELD, Conn. (AP) — A symbol of support for U.S. troops has become the centerpiece of a contentious free-speech debate in this small town in the hills of northwestern Connecticut.

Yellow ribbons had adorned trees on the historic Litchfield Town Green since the start of the U.S. war in Iraq in 2003, placed there by families with relatives serving overseas in the military.

But the five remaining ribbons were taken down

Yellow ribbons removed from town green amid speech dispute

quietly Thursday by a local official enforcing an ordinance banning placards and other postings on the green, which dates to the early 1700s. The concern? Allowing the ribbons opens the door to any displays of free speech, no matter how hateful or offensive it might be.

Controversy over the ribbons has flared occasionally over the years and recently remerged in the Borough of Litchfield. In December, acting Warden Gayle Carr and the board of burgesses voted to re-

new enforcement of the ordinance. Seventeen people in the audience spoke in opposition to removing the ribbons at the December meeting, and none spoke in favor, according to borough records.

Val Caron, a retired electrician whose son is in the Air Force, had been tending the ribbons with his wife for more than a decade. He said he is considering legal action to put the ribbons back up.

"What they did is they slapped everybody in the military right in the face,"

Caron said. "There's a lot of people that are very upset. ... This is not over."

Carr removed the ribbons late Thursday morning, stuffing them into a backpack as she walked her dog on a nearly deserted town green.

"When it comes to a public space like that, if you allow some speech you have to allow all speech," Carr said in a phone interview. "But under the (borough) code we are allowed to say no speech, and that doesn't discriminate against anybody." □

In southern Dutch town, cafes open in lockdown protest

By A. FURTULA/M.CORDER
Associated Press
VALKENBURG, Netherlands (AP) —

Shops, bars and restaurants in a southern Dutch town opened Friday in a protest action that underscored growing anger at weeks of coronavirus lockdown measures, a day before some of the restrictions are expected to be eased. Locals flocked to eat and drink at outdoor tables of restaurants in the main street of Valkenburg in open defiance of a lockdown in the Netherlands. Authorities in the tourist town, which was devastated by flooding last year, didn't take action to enforce coronavirus restrictions. "It's very difficult, it doesn't feel fair at the moment. The first few lockdowns were logical, I agreed with them, but it doesn't feel fair any more," said Didi Corten,

who opened the outdoor terrace of Brasserie America for the day. "After the flooding, we want to open again very soon because otherwise I'm afraid a lot of businesses will not survive," she added. "It can't go on like this." More towns in the region were planning similar protest openings on Saturday if hospitality remains in lockdown. The country has been in a tough lockdown since the week before Christmas in a move the government says is aimed at "buying time" to ease pressure on overburdened hospitals and ramp up the country's vaccine booster program. While infections have shot to record numbers recently as the omicron variant became the dominant coronavirus strain, hospital and intensive care unit admissions have been falling for weeks. The country's public

health institute recorded an average of more than 31,000 new cases a day over the last week. Prime Minister Mark Rutte is holding a COVID-19 news conference Friday evening and Dutch media citing unnamed government sources report that he is likely to allow nonessential stores along with businesses like hairdressers to reopen. Universities also are expected to reopen for in-person classes from Monday. "There will be a real difference between today and tomorrow," Social Affairs Minister Karien van Gennip told reporters before a Cabinet meeting. Bars, restaurants, museums and theaters are, however, expected to remain closed, sparking anger from those sectors. Dirk Beljaarts, general director of the national hospitality industry group, said



Associated Press

said he met with new Economic Affairs Minister Micky Adriaansens to press for bars and restaurants to be allowed to reopen. "The Cabinet can't leave hospitality (& culture) as the only sectors out in the cold," Beljaarts tweeted. The lockdown has led to frustration particularly in towns like Valkenburg that are close to the Dutch bor-

ders with Germany and Belgium that are seeing people visiting those neighboring nations to shop or dine out because they have fewer restrictions. The booster drive was slow to get started in the Netherlands, but has gathered pace in recent weeks. Just over 86% of adults are fully vaccinated and 45% have had a booster shot. □

Elephants dying from eating plastic waste in Sri Lankan dump

By ACHALA PUSSALLA
Associated Press
PALLAKKADU, Sri Lanka (AP) —

Conservationists and veterinarians are warning that plastic waste in an open landfill in eastern Sri Lanka is killing elephants in the region, after two more were found dead over the weekend. Around 20 elephants have died over the last eight years after consuming plastic trash in the dump in Pallakkadu village in Ampara district, about 210 kilometers (130 miles) east of the capital, Colombo. Examinations of the dead animals showed they had swallowed large amounts of nondegradable plastic that is found in the garbage dump, wildlife veterinarian Nihal Pushpakumara said. "Polythene, food wrappers, plastic, other non-digestibles and water were the only things we could see in the post mortems. The normal food that elephants eat and digest was not evident," he said. Elephants are revered in Sri Lanka but are also endangered. Their numbers have dwindled from about



Associated Press

14,000 in the 19th century to 6,000 in 2011, according to the country's first elephant census. They are increasingly vulnerable because of the loss and degradation of their natural habitat. Many venture closer to human settlements in search of food, and some are killed by poachers or farmers angry over damage to their crops. Hungry elephants seek out the waste in the landfill, consuming plastic

as well as sharp objects that damage their digestive systems, Pushpakumara said. "The elephants then stop eating and become too weak to keep their heavy frames upright. When that happens, they can't consume food or water, which quickens their death," he said. In 2017, the government announced that it will recycle the garbage in dumps near wildlife zones to prevent elephants from con-

suming plastic waste. It also said electric fences would be erected around the sites to keep the animals away. But neither has been fully implemented. There are 54 waste dumps in wildlife zones around the country, with around 300 elephants roaming near them, according to officials. The waste management site in Pallakkadu village was set up in 2008 with aid from the European Union.

Garbage collected from nine nearby villages is being dumped there but is not being recycled. In 2014, the electric fence protecting the site was struck by lightning and authorities never repaired it, allowing elephants to enter and rummage through the dump. Residents say elephants have moved closer and settled near the waste pit, sparking fear among nearby villagers. Many use firecrackers to chase the animals away when they wander into the village, and some have erected electric fences around their homes. But the villagers often don't know how to install the electric fences so they are safe and "could endanger their own lives as well as those of the elephants," said Keerthi Ranasinghe, a local village councilor. "Even though we call them a menace, wild elephants are also a resource. Authorities need to come up with a way to protect both human lives and the elephants that also allows us to continue our agricultural activities," he said. □

In shadow of pandemic, Danish queen marks 50 years on throne

By JAN M. OLSEN

Associated Press

COPENHAGEN, Denmark
(AP) — Denmark's Queen

Margrethe marked her 50 years on the throne of Europe's oldest ruling monarchy Friday, with some of the planned festivities postponed for September due to the pandemic.

The outbreak, which also stopped public celebrations for the popular monarch's 80th birthday in 2020, forced several guests to stay away from the two-day celebrations. They included Margrethe's younger sister, former Queen Anne-Marie of Greece whose husband has tested positive for COVID-19. The Greek monarchy was abolished in the 1970s.

Flanked by her other sister, Princess Benedikte, her two sons — including Crown Prince Frederik, the heir to the throne — and their spouses, Margrethe laid a wreath at the grave of her parents at the Roskilde cathedral, west of Copenhagen, where Danish royals have been buried since 1559.

She also met with the government and attended a reception at Parliament.

"You are a moral compass," Henrik Dam Kristensen, speaker of the Danish Parliament said in an address. He noted that Margrethe is Denmark's first queen since her namesake Queen Margrethe I, who ruled from 1375–1412.

While Friday's part of the celebrations was maintained,



Associated Press

jubilee events scheduled for Saturday have been postponed, including Margrethe being cheered by thousands from the balcony of the Amalienborg Palace in Copenhagen, a ride through the capital in a horse-drawn carriage, a gala performance at the Royal Theater and a festive banquet.

On Jan. 14, 1972, her father, King Frederik IX, died after a short illness. The following day, a red-eyed Margrethe, aged 31, stood on the balcony of the downtown Christiansborg Castle and was formally proclaimed queen before a crowd of thousands.

Throughout her reign, the queen has crisscrossed the realm and made numerous visits abroad.

Last year she traveled to Denmark's self-governing territories of the Faeroe Islands and Greenland.

She also went to Berlin for the centennial of the 1920 reunification with Denmark of the southern part of the Jutland peninsula which had been under German rule.

When she has a break from official duties, Margrethe — Europe's second longest reigning monarch after Britain's Queen Elizabeth II — paints, sketches, illustrates books, creates church textiles and embroiders. She has also created costumes and sets for several ballets at the Tivoli gardens, Copenhagen's downtown amusement park.

Born on April 16, 1940, a week after the start of Nazi

Germany's World War II occupation of Denmark, the infant princess became a symbol of hope to many Danes in the war years.

It took a vote to make her queen, though. In 1953, the Danish Constitution was changed following a referendum in which more than 85% of participants voted to allow female succession. Speaking at the event in parliament on Friday, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen commented that enabling Margrethe to become queen "was an excellent choice."

Previously, the Danish throne had descended only through the male line, but the rise of feminism and the fact that Frederik and Swedish-born Queen Ingrid had three daughters but

no son, had swayed public opinion.

The Danish constitution gives Margrethe no real political power but she is clearly well-versed in law and knows the content of legislation she is called upon to sign.

"My principal and most important task is to be Queen of Denmark and the head of state," she said in a recent TV interview. "But I am grateful that I can also express myself artistically."

One of her latest projects is collages for a film by Danish Academy Award-winning director Bille August, who is adapting a story about a fairytale kingdom. The film is expected in 2023.

Her popularity has in part grown because of her straightforward talking in her annual televised New Years speeches, where she has spoken about being less "selfish," integrating foreigners and tackling loneliness.

In 2014, 82% of respondents in a poll opposed abolishing the monarchy.

Ten years ago, celebrating her 40th anniversary on the throne, Margrethe reflected on her role and the future of the Danish monarchy, saying: "You don't work to keep a position, you work to keep your country."

"You give your life to your country," she said. Margrethe has several times brushed off the suggestion she should abdicate in favor of her 52-year-old son, Crown Prince Frederik. □



Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel has administered a 4th vaccine dose to more than 500,000 people, the Health

Ministry said Friday. Israel began administering second boosters to the most vulnerable late last

Israel says 500K have received 4th vaccine dose

month and later began offering them to everyone over 60.

Authorities hope the additional boosters will blunt a wave of infections driven by the omicron variant. Health Ministry figures show Israel currently has some 250,000 active cases. But only 317 patients are listed as seriously ill, far fewer than during previous waves.

"Israel's trailblazing vaccine campaign has reached

another milestone," Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said in a statement. "Thank you to the half a million Israelis who got the fourth dose of the COVID vaccine and in so doing, help to keep us all safer."

Israel was among the first countries to roll out vaccines a year ago and began widely offering third doses last summer in a bid to contain the delta variant. Nearly half the popu-

lation has received at least one booster shot.

The country of nearly 9.5 million has reported 8,298 deaths from COVID-19 since the pandemic began.

Separately, the government announced that Eyal Hulata, the national security adviser, had tested positive for the virus. It said the prime minister and his staff took antigen tests that came back negative. □

Afghan tradition allows girls to access the freedom of boys

By **MSTYSLAV CHERNOV**
and **ELENA BECATOROS**
Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) —

In a Kabul neighborhood, a gaggle of boys kick a yellow ball around a dusty playground, their boisterous cries echoing off the surrounding apartment buildings.

Dressed in sweaters and jeans or the traditional Afghan male clothing of baggy pants and long shirt, none stand out as they jostle to score a goal. But unbeknown to them, one is different from the others.

At not quite 8 years old, Sanam is a bacha posh: a girl living as a boy. One day a few months ago, the girl with rosy cheeks and an impish smile had her dark hair cut short, donned boys' clothes and took on a boy's name, Omid. The move opened up a boy's world: playing soccer and cricket with boys, wrestling with the neighborhood butcher's son, working to help the family make ends meet.

In Afghanistan's heavily patriarchal, male-dominated society, where women and girls are usually relegated to the home, bacha posh, Dari for "dressed as a boy," is the one tradition allowing girls access to the freer male world.

Under the practice, a girl dresses, behaves and is treated as a boy, with all the freedoms and obligations that entails. The child can play sports, attend a madrassa, or religious school, and, sometimes crucially for the family, work. But there is a time



Associated Press

limit: Once a bacha posh reaches puberty, she is expected to revert to traditional girls' gender roles. The transition is not always easy.

It is unclear how the practice is viewed by Afghanistan's new rulers, the Taliban, who seized power in mid-August and have made no public statements on the issue.

Their rule so far has been less draconian than the last time they were in power in the 1990s, but women's freedoms have still been severely curtailed. Thousands of women have been barred from working, and girls beyond primary school age have not been able to return to public schools in most places.

With a crackdown on women's rights, the bacha posh tradition could become even more attractive for

some families. And as the practice is temporary, with the children eventually reverting to female roles, the Taliban might not deal with the issue at all, said Thomas Barfield, a professor of anthropology at Boston University who has written several books on Afghanistan. "Because it's inside the family and because it's not a permanent status, the Taliban may stay out (of it)," Barfield said.

It is unclear where the practice originated or how old it is, and it is impossible to know how widespread it might be. A somewhat similar tradition exists in Albania, another deeply patriarchal society, although it is limited to adults. Under Albania's "sworn virgin" tradition, a woman would take an oath of celibacy and declare herself a man, after which she could in-

herit property, work and sit on a village council — all of which would have been out of bounds for a woman. In Afghanistan, the bacha posh tradition is "one of the most under-investigated" topics in terms of gender issues, said Barfield, who spent about two years in the 1970s living with an Afghan nomad family that included a bacha posh. "Precisely because the girls revert back to the female role, they marry, it kind of disappears."

Girls chosen as bacha posh usually are the more boisterous, self-assured daughters. "The role fits so well that sometimes even outside the family, people are not aware that it exists," he said.

"It's almost so invisible that it's one of the few gender issues that doesn't show up as a political or social ques-

tion," Barfield noted.

The reasons parents might want a bacha posh vary. With sons traditionally valued more than daughters, the practice usually occurs in families without a boy. Some consider it a status symbol, and some believe it will bring good luck for the next child to be born a boy.

But for others, like Sanam's family, the choice was one of necessity. Last year, with Afghanistan's economy collapsing, construction work dried up. Sanam's father, already suffering from a back injury, lost his job as a plumber. He turned to selling coronavirus masks on the streets, making the equivalent of \$1-\$2 per day. But he needed a helper.

The family has four daughters and one son, but their 11-year-old boy doesn't have full use of his hands following an injury. So the parents said they decided to make Sanam a bacha posh.

"We had to do this because of poverty," said Sanam's mother, Fahima. "We don't have a son to work for us, and her father doesn't have anyone to help him. So I will consider her my son until she becomes a teenager."

Sanam says she prefers living as a boy.

"It's better to be a boy ... I wear (Afghan male clothes), jeans and jackets, and go with my father and work," she said. She likes playing in the park with her brother's friends and playing cricket and soccer. □

Romania to launch COVID-19 jabs for children aged 5 to 11

BUCHAREST, Romania (AP)

— Children in Romania aged between 5-11 will be able to get vaccinated against COVID-19 starting late January, authorities said, as the country grappled Friday with a virus surge and low adult vaccination rates.

Parents or legal guardians can schedule appointments starting this week to get their children inoculated with Pfizer jabs that will

be available from Jan. 26, the national vaccination committee said Thursday. Health authorities said 219 pediatric vaccination centers are configured in the national programming platform and shots can also be administered without appointments at dedicated centers, and in some general practitioners' surgeries. The jabs will be administered in 21-day intervals. Romania, a Eu-

ropean Union country of around 19.5 million, has the second-lowest vaccination rate against COVID-19 in the 27-nation bloc, with just 48% of adults fully inoculated, compared to the EU average of 80%. Many other EU countries have already launched vaccination programs for children under 12.

Despite assistance from the bloc's Commission in December to help Romania

launch a media campaign to stimulate its vaccination rate, the daily jab uptake has remained low at around 25,000 over the last week. The country is currently facing a rapid surge in infections, on Friday registering 9,884 new infections — the highest number of daily cases since early November when infections were dropping following a deadly wave that overwhelmed the country's un-

derfunded health care system. Since the pandemic began, Romania has confirmed nearly 1.9 million COVID-19 infections, and 59,180 people have died. Several hundred cases of the fast-spreading omicron variant have already been confirmed and health officials have warned that new pandemic highs of 25,000 daily infections could be registered in the coming weeks. □

New beginnings after the kitchen table and beyond with new restaurant: Infini by Chef Urvin Croes

PALM BEACH — After spearheading The Kitchen Table for five years, receiving notable recognitions in USA Today, The Daily Meal and earning the #1 spot on Tripadvisor's list of Fine Dining Restaurants in the Caribbean, Chef Urvin Croes has now moved on to higher heights. Infini, his new chef's table, which opened at the Blue Residences in November 2020, allows the Michelin-trained Aruban culinary artist to create gastronomic experiences unconfined by cultural or regional expectations. The former The Kitchen Table space has since been renovated into a suitable culinary studio to host this vision. In describing these changes, Croes says: "We opened up the entire kitchen and elevated the dining tables so guests have a front row stadium-like view of each step of the preparations. The spotlights, which we carefully choreograph, follow the plates' transition from blank canvas into culinary works of art."

"It is a flavor that you cannot define, but you can create."

He had been sitting on the first menu for over a year. Inspired by umami, one of the five basic tastes, and also Japanese for "essence of deliciousness", Chef Croes strived to organically produce this palate in each dish of the eight-course Chef's Impression. "It is a flavor that you cannot define, but you can create. Take our popular langoustine for example; we com-

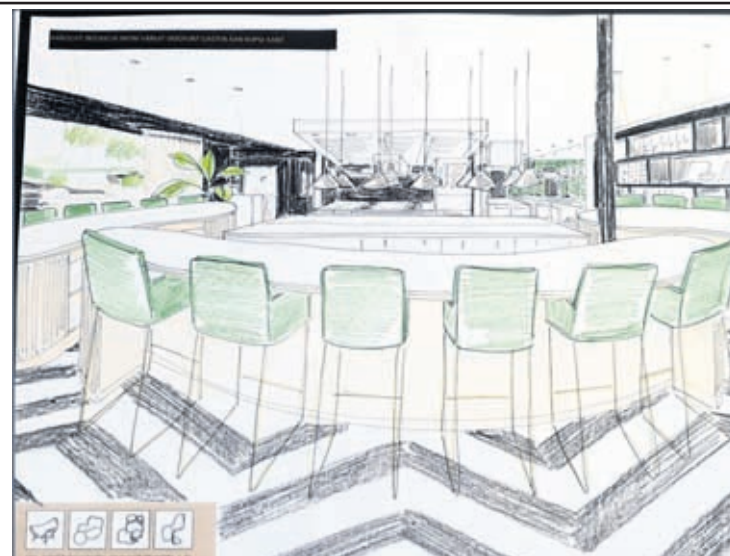


bined elements that are rarely paired together: the bitter, sour and salty flavors of the lemon cream, kombucha, green grapes, watercress and achioite, fused with the sweet and delicate taste of the langoustine induce ultimate umami."

After hosting the first menu for three months, the Executive Chef introduced a second tour de force in February 2021 — this time a pescatarian menu dedicated to Lent, of which Croes has to say: "I wanted to focus on the finest fish in the world, they are the protagonists of this season." Visitors can experience the second Chef's Impression until May 2021, at which point Croes and his team will reveal exciting new flavors for the summer.

"Without a great team, there is no great chef"

"There is very little I can do by myself. Without a great team, there is no great chef", says Croes, while raving about the six young professionals sharing his kitchen. All graduates of Aruba's EPI College and familiar faces to the Chef as each one has completed their culinary internship under his guidance. In fact, Infini's Chef de Cuisine, Ashwin Maduro, was Urvin's very first student,



before relocating to Amsterdam, where he worked at several Michelin-starred restaurants, including &mo-shik (formerly &Samhoud Places). Having recently returned to Aruba, Chef Maduro is thrilled to be reunited with his first mentor and hopes to secure Aruba's space on the global map of unique culinary experiences. Similarly, after four years working in the two-Michelin starred restaurant Spectrum, Chef de Partie Moises Ramirez returned home to share his vast experience in formulating recipes with meticulous attention to detail and consistency. Further down the kitchen line, Chef de Partie Alvaro Yi, who has worked at the two-Michelin starred FG Restaurant, is all about expressing himself through cooking and plating to create art that you can eat. Mixologist Marc-Anthony Rannis brings eight years of experience in the fine dining industry to Infini. His fine craftsmanship is displayed in the unparalleled wine pairings and signature cocktails, which include his personally homemade syrups, garnishes and fresh local ingredients. Maître D' and Junior Sommelier Jessica Theysen, who previously managed renowned Chef Dennis Huwaë's Restaurant Daalder in Amsterdam, is a true storyteller. From the moment she serves the Salinity welcome drink and the culinary tale begins, she takes you on an adventure around the world to discover never-before-tasted combinations. Then, towards the end of the night, it is his time to shine — Pastry Chef Jean-Claude Werleman, that is. After spending the last two years perfecting his recipes in the Pastry Department of the Ritz Carlton Aruba, Werleman joins Infini to continue exploring his passion for experimenting with colors and bold flavors.

"It's time to show that Aruba is a culinary destination of its own"

"The goal is to leave our visitors speechless. The look on their faces whenever they take the first bite says it all and it is priceless", shares Croes, with a smile. Reclaiming the spot of number one restaurant in the Caribbean is also in sight, but this time he will not stop there. "In the end, we want Aruba to be recognized for its culinary mastery. We have trained the best culinary artists right here on the island and they have proven themselves internationally in the most renowned kitchens in the world. Now it is time to show that Aruba is a culinary destination of its own. Who knows where that will take us; hopefully to infinity and beyond."



Infini located at Blue Residences currently serves an eight-course Chef's Impression to up to 21 guests starting at 6:30PM. To make reservations visit www.infiniaruba.com or call +297-699-3982. □





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Amazing things to know about Aruba

1. Everyone native Aruban speaks four languages; English, Spanish, Dutch and Papiamentu. Dutch and Papiamentu are the official languages of Aruba.
2. The origin of Papiamentu is still a bit of a mystery. However, Arubans say that it was developed from Portuguese-African pidgin which was used as the language for communication between slaves and slave traders. There are also some Dutch and Spanish influences.
3. In most schools in Aruba children have all their lessons in Dutch. They can only speak Papiamentu during the Papiamentu class.
4. Aruba is a former Dutch colony. It is now its own country. However, Aruba is still part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.
5. Aruba is not in Hurricane Alley, which means there's no BAD time to visit Aruba.
6. Aruba's currency is the Aruban florin which is worth about 0.56 US Dollars. Dollars are accepted everywhere though.
7. The crime rate in Aruba is pretty low. It is one of the safest islands in the Caribbean.
8. Carnival in Aruba is a BIG DEAL. It's not just Brazil! There's parades, Carnival Queen elections, dance competitions and more. So if you're in Aruba in February, make sure to attend one of the many Carnival events. Unfortunately, this year we won't be having our carnival again due to Covid.
9. We produce our own drinking water thanks to their desalination plant. You can drink the water straight from the taps. The electricity on the island is also a by-product of the desalinization plant.
10. Aruba is home to a rare species of the burrowing owl. It lives in burrows in the ground hidden by cacti. It is one of Aruba's national symbols and appears on postage stamps.
11. Before Covid Aruba had over a million tourists visit its shores. That's around 10 times the local population.
12. There are over 90 different nationalities living on the island in pretty much perfect harmony.
13. The Aruban flag was adopted in 1976.
14. Aruba's national day is March 18th. Just after St. Patrick's day.

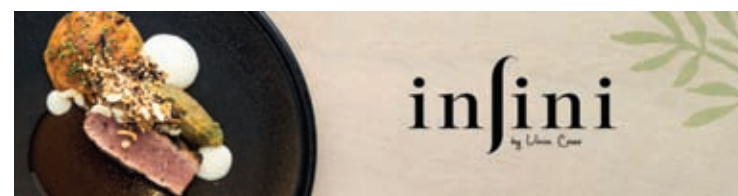
Loyal visitors honored at Divi Village



EAGLE BEACH — John and Barbara Hubbard from New Hampshire were recently honored as Goodwill Ambassadors due to their 24th consecutive visit to Aruba.

Marouska Heyliger representing the Aruba

Tourism Authority conducted the ceremony which was held at the Divi Village. The Hubbards love coming to the island for the weather, food and the people and especially their home away from home Divi Village. □



Taste limitless possibilities at Infini, where Chef Urvin Croes and his team explores without boundaries and steps with both feet outside of the box to create his most sensational dishes yet. This meticulously designed restaurant located inside Blue Residences on scenic Eagle Beach is a chef's table concept with limited seating where diners are able to interact with the staff and other guests alike throughout the evening.

Join us for an
unforgettable experience.



Reserve your seats.
Dinner Awaits!

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InfiniAruba
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Census 2020 results



ORANJESTAD - The Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) informs the results of the Censo2020. The results of Censo2020 are compared with Censo2010 to indicate if there were changes over the last 10 years. The results are categorized into eight topics. Here are the results for the topic, Population

How many are we?

During the Censo2020 a total of 108.166 persons were counted, representing an increase of 6.682 persons compared to Censo2010. It means that in the last ten years, our population continued to grow more slowly than in the prior decades. During the last ten years, the population increased by 6.6%. It means that the population density continues to grow. While in the Censo2010 there were 564 persons per square kilometer, during the Censo2021 they counted 601 persons per square kilometers. Our population consists

of more women than men. Women represent 52.8% and men 47.2% of the population. The average median age is 42 years. It entails four years more compared to Censo2010. The average age of women is 43 years and of men 40 years.

The largest group of our population consists of adults between 18 to 64 years old. They represent 62.8% of the population. Compared to Censo2010 this group increased by 4.3%. The second largest group consists of children and youth between 0 and 17 years. They represent 21.2% of our population. Compared to Censo2010 this group decreased by 10.9%.

The smallest group of our population consists of senior citizens, persons 65 years and older. This group consists of 16.0% of the population. Compared with Censo2010, it increased by 63%. In other words, the population of Aruba increasingly consists of persons 65 years and older. □

Housing

According to the data collected by Censo2020, 78.3% of households in Aruba live in a house. In Censo2010, 79.5% of households lived in houses. The second-largest group of households lives in an apartment. This group represents 17.9% of households in Aruba. It entails a slight increase compared to Censo 2010, where 16.4% of households lived in apartments

3.8% of the total households live in different types of housing, namely:

- 2.0% live in trailer or container;
- 1.2% live in a separate room within a house;
- 0.4% live in an outside room;
- 0.2% live in other types of housing, for example, a condominium.

Compared to prior censuses, for example, 2000 and 2010, there are no significant changes in the percentage of households living in these types of housing, except for households living in an outside room. In the Censo2000, 2.0% of households in Aruba lived in an outside room. The percentage dropped to 1.1% in Censo 2010 and continued to decline to 0.4% in Censo2020.

Homeownership

The Censo2020 results indicate that 75% of households own the house they live in. It represents an increase of 11.9% compared to Censo2010, where the percentage stood at 67%. The percentage of households that rent their home decreased from 28.2% in Censo2010 to 22.3% in Censo2020. The percentage of households that live free of charge in their homes also decreased from 3.7% in 2010 to 2.4% in 2020.

For more information, you may visit the CBS website www.census2020.aw or their Facebook: Central Bureau of Statistics Aruba. □

Covid Test Center at Paseo has the best experience!

PALM BEACH - Don't spend a single moment of your long awaited holiday in Aruba thinking about your return testing. The Covid Test Center Aruba located at the Paseo Herencia Mall is your travel ally. Just sit back and relax knowing that, when the time comes, their professional staff will make this process a breeze for you. No need to make an appointment or dread the nasal swab; you'll be done with it in a matter of minutes and back to fun stuff.

Some regions require proof or certification of negative COVID-19 status before allowing people into or out of the country. With rules and guidelines varying greatly from country to country, the safest approach is to have recent proof you are COVID-19 negative before you get to the airport. Co-



vid Test Center @ Paseo provides both PCR and Antigen type testing with results within hours; and both are accepted by the CDC. Covid Test Center @ Paseo is conveniently located at the Paseo Herencia Mall in the heart of the Palm Beach Strip and right across from the Playa Linda and Holiday Inn hotels; only two doors from T.G.I. Friday's. We are open seven days a week, between 9 am and

9 pm. This gives you the choice to walk in when it better suits you. It can be at the start or at the end of your day. No appointment needed here.

The friendly technicians at Covid Test Center @ Paseo will take your information as we are aware it is imperative that this shows accurately on the results. For a seamless process, please verify that you have provided the correct email to

deliver the certificate. Said certificate can be printed at our offices should you wish to do so.

We understand that nobody enjoys doing a nasal swab. That is why we take pride in our reputation of being the gentlest swabbers on the island. First, we will not rush you just to go to the next in line. Through clear given instructions we want you to feel comfortable. When you are ready, we will promptly but tenderly take a proper sample. Many elsewhere traumatized people praise the difference it makes to test with us.

Forget about counting hours before your flight, our turnaround is fast! For travel to the US, for example, a day before will suffice. A great game plan is to test first, then head out for an evening of dining, shopping and entertainment at



the Paseo Herencia Mall, home of the water and lights show in the evenings. By the time you are back at the hotel, your results will be ready in your inbox. A PCR test costs \$75 and results are ready the next day, while Antigen test costs \$35 with same day results. If you are staying at an off-high-rise area property, you can benefit from the free parking our customers receive at the mall lot.).

For more information follow us on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter. □

Cyberattack in Ukraine targets government websites

By Y. KARMANAU, F. BAJAK
 and DASHA LITVINOVA
 Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — A cyberattack left a number of Ukrainian government websites temporarily unavailable Friday, officials said.

While it wasn't immediately clear who was responsible, the disruption came amid heightened tensions with Russia and after talks between Moscow and the West failed to yield any significant progress this week. Ukrainian Foreign Ministry spokesman Oleg Nikolenko told The Associated Press it was too soon to say who was behind it, "but there is a long record of Russian cyber assaults against Ukraine in the past."

Moscow had previously denied involvement in cyberattacks against Ukraine.

About 70 websites of both national and regional government bodies were targeted in the attack, but no critical infrastructure was affected and no personal data accessed, according to Victor Zhora, deputy chair of the State Service of Special Communication and Information Protection. The hack amounted to a simple defacement of government websites, said Oleh Derevianko, a leading private sector expert and founder of the ISSP cybersecurity firm. The hackers got into a content management system they all use, but "didn't get access to the websites themselves."

The main question, said Derevianko, is whether this is a standalone hacktivist action — "patriotic" Russian freelancers — or part of a larger state-backed operation.

A message posted by the hackers in Russian, Ukrainian and Polish that claimed Ukrainians' personal data had been placed online and destroyed. Its threatening tone told Ukrainians to "be afraid and expect the worst." In response, Poland's government issued a statement noting that Russia has a long history of such disinformation campaigns and noted that the Polish in the message was



Associated Press

error-ridden and clearly not from a native speaker.

Tensions between Ukraine and Russia have been running high in recent months after Moscow amassed an estimated 100,000 troops near Ukraine's border.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said Friday that the alliance will continue to provide "strong political and practical support" to Ukraine in light of the cyberattacks.

Russia has long history of launching cyber operations against Ukraine, including a hack of its voting system ahead of 2014 national elections and an assault the country's power grid in 2015 and 2016. In 2017, Russia unleashed one of most damaging cyberattacks on record with the NotPetya virus that targeted Ukrainian businesses and caused more than \$10 billion in damage globally. Ukrainian cybersecurity professionals have been fortifying the defenses of critical infrastructure ever since. Zhora has told the AP that officials are particularly concerned about Russian attacks on the power grid, rail network and central bank.

Experts have said recently that the threat of another such cyberattack is significant as it would give Russian President Vladimir Putin the ability to destabilize Ukraine and other ex-Soviet countries that wish to join

NATO without having to commit troops.

"If you're trying to use it as a stage and a deterrent to stop people from moving forward with NATO consideration or other things, cyber is perfect," Tim Conway, a cybersecurity instructor at the SANS Institute, told the AP in an interview last week.

Conway was in Ukraine last month conducting a simulated cyberattack on the country's energy sector. The U.S. has been helping Ukraine bolster its cyber defenses through agencies including the Department of Energy and USAID.

The White House didn't immediately respond to a request seeking comment.

In a separate development Friday, Russia's Federal Security Service, or FSB, announced the detention of members of the REvil ransomware gang, which was behind last year's Fourth of July weekend supply-chain attack targeting the Florida-based software firm Kaseya that crippled more than 1,000 businesses and public organizations globally.

The FSB claimed to have dismantled the gang, but REvil effectively disbanded in July. Cybersecurity experts say its members largely moved to other ransomware syndicates. They cast doubt Friday on whether the arrests would significantly impact ran-

somware gangs, whose activities have only moderately eased after a string of high-profile attacks on critical U.S. infrastructure last year including the Colonial Pipeline.

The FSB said it raided the homes of 14 group members and seized over 426 million rubles (\$5.6 million), including in cryptocurrency as well as computers, crypto wallets and 20 elite cars "bought with money obtained by criminal means." All those detained have been charged with "illegal circulation of means of payment," a criminal offense punishable by up to six years in prison. The suspects weren't named.

According to the FSB, the operation was conducted at the request of U.S. authorities, who reported the leader of the group to officials in Moscow. It's the first significant public action by Russian authorities since U.S. President Joe Biden warned Putin last year that he needed to crack down on ransomware gangs in his country.

Experts said it was too early to know if the arrests signal a major Kremlin crackdown on ransomware criminals — or if may just have been a piecemeal effort to appease the White House.

Bill Siegel, CEO of the ransomware response firm Coveware, said he'll be watching to see what kind of prison time those arrest-

ed get. "The follow-through on sentencing will send the strongest signal one way or another as to if there has truly been a change in how tolerant Russia will be in the future to cyber criminals," he said via email.

And Yelisey Boguslavskiy, research director at Advanced Intelligence, said that while the arrests do follow a pattern of Kremlin pressure on ransomware criminals — including in some cases prompting them to hand over decryption keys — those arrested could simply be low-level affiliates, not the core group that managed the malware. The REvil syndicate also apparently ripped off some affiliates so it had enemies in the criminal underground, he said.

REvil's attacks crippled tens of thousands of computers worldwide and yielded at least \$200 million in ransom payments, Attorney General Merrick Garland said in November when announcing charges against two hackers affiliated with the gang.

Such attacks brought significant attention from law enforcement officials around the world. The U.S. announced charges against two affiliates in November, hours after European law enforcement officials revealed the results of a lengthy, 17-nation operation. As part of that operation, Europol said, a total of seven hackers linked to REvil and another ransomware family have been arrested since February.

The AP reported last year that U.S. officials, meanwhile, shared a small number of names of suspected ransomware operators with Russian officials, who have said they were investigating.

Brett Callow, a ransomware analyst with the cybersecurity firm Emsisoft, said that "whatever Russia's motivations may be, the arrests would 'certainly send shockwaves through the cybercrime community. The gang's former affiliates and business associates will invariably be concerned about the implications.'" □

CROSSWORD

By THOMAS JOSEPH

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1-15

AXYDLBAAXR
is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

1-15

CRYPTOQUOTE

R S P T N S S P Q P L G N F Z S

H L N Y Z Y V J P R S P T N S R S O F

G N F " Z S E Z S J " K R I P U C P L P

P O K P Z S O Z X P N S S P

I R L L R U O Z S J W P L H C

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: RESULTS! WHY, MAN, I HAVE GOTTEN A LOT OF RESULTS. I KNOW SEVERAL THOUSAND THINGS THAT WON'T WORK. THOMAS EDISON



Associated Press

Insurers, employers start helping more with chronic disease

By TOM MURPHY
AP Health Writer

Vanessa Akinniyi was stuck in denial about diabetes until a care manager from her health insurer coaxed her out. The Jacksonville, Florida, resident didn't want to start insulin. All the medicines she tried made her sick. But Florida Blue care manager Miriam Bercier chipped away with phone check-ins. The nurse fed Akinniyi information about her condition and talked about potential problems she could run into like vision loss. "She cared, and I felt that," Akinniyi said. "That made me start caring more." Insurers and employers are taking a renewed interest in programs like these that help people deal with chronic and potentially expensive health problems.

They are identifying patients with diabetes or high blood pressure and connecting them with care managers who can answer questions about medicine or help them change their

diets. Some plans also are waiving or reducing fees for doctor visits, eye and foot exams and supplies like insulin pumps. They aim to encourage people to get regular care so they don't need an expensive hospital stay when their untreated condition grows worse. "Everybody wins if the patient is healthier," said Dr. Sameer Amin, chief medical officer for the health insurer Oscar, which is selling a new plan specifically for people with diabetes in individual insurance markets this year.

Programs that attempt to help people with chronic health problems can vary widely and have been around for years. They're gaining traction again in individual and employer-sponsored coverage as bill-payers focus more on helping patients get regular care instead of hiking costs like deductibles, which can keep people out of the health care system entirely. Experts say these programs can cut health care costs

and keep patients happy. But they require frequent education. And some think doctor's offices not insurers should be running them.

"It's about relationships. ... People don't trust health plans or particularly want a call from their insurer," said Elizabeth Mitchell, CEO of the Purchaser Business Group on Health, a non-profit coalition that works with large employers.

Akinniyi had no problems trusting Florida Blue. The 61-year-old started talking to Bercier about a year ago, after Akinniyi's diagnosis prompted the insurer's care management team to reach out.

The care manager helped her figure out how to exercise more, track what she eats and change her diet to cut sugars and starches. Akinniyi also started taking medication regularly.

"I just feel different now," she said. "I have energy. I look at myself different because I came out of those dark days of denial about diabetes."

Florida Blue started its diabetes program in 2014 and offers it to customers enrolled in individual insurance coverage.

Oscar began selling its diabetes-specific plan on individual markets in several states for 2022 and may consider adding plans for other chronic health problems. □

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#BettyWhiteChallenge raising money and awareness for animals

By **GLENN GAMBOA and HALELUYA HADERO** AP Business Writers

The late Betty White was a tireless lifetime advocate for animals, from caring for those without homes to launching her own weekly TV show, "The Pet Set," dedicated to her celebrity friends and their pets.

Her most far-reaching contribution, though, may be yet to come: On Monday, fans of White will be poised to donate to animal welfare charities and shelters as part of what's been dubbed the #BettyWhiteChallenge. And animal welfare nonprofits are gearing up to capitalize on the viral tribute to the star of "The Golden Girls" and "Hot in Cleveland" on what would have been her 100th birthday.

"I've had many conversations with Betty about animal welfare, and I know she's looking down from heaven and really smiling," said Robin Ganzert, who leads American Humane, an animal welfare organization that White was involved with for more than 60 years.

"She'll be smiling on her birthday," she said. "And she'll be smiling about the lives she's changed."

It isn't exactly clear who started the #BettyWhiteChallenge on social media shortly after White's death on Dec. 31. However it began, the idea to donate \$5 to a local animal rescue organization in White's name on her birthday quickly took off and drew support from celebrities like actors Mark Hamill and George Takei on Twitter.

Traffic to American Humane's website spiked after White's passing. Ganzert said donations, too, have increased. The nonprofit is waiting to reveal by how much until more gifts flood in, including sizable donations it's expecting from some donors.

During the decades in which White was involved with the organization, she made fundraising appeals



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and served on its board and as a presenter and judge on its televised show featuring "hero" dogs. During tapings of "The Pet Set" in the early 1970s, Ganzert said, White would have American Humane representatives on set to ensure that animals were safe. In 2012, the nonprofit honored her with its highest award, the National Humanitarian Medal. Ganzert said White would also make her a photo book each year of the animals the organization has helped.

"She kept those out on her coffee table," Ganzert said. "And (it) always touched me whenever we would visit."

Best Friends Animal Society, a Utah-based animal welfare organization, has

raised \$25,000 in donations made in White's name, according to the group's chief mission officer Holly Sizemore. The group has promoted the #BettyWhiteChallenge broadly across its social media channels to drum up support both for its work and other organizations.

"That's the beauty of animal welfare," Sizemore said. "There's something for everyone to support. There's so much good work happening and so much opportunity, particularly right now, to make the world a better place for people and animals."

Sizemore hopes that Monday will bring plenty of donations and attention for animal welfare.

"What an incredible opportunity to honor Betty White's

legacy to come together as a nation and celebrate something that she was so passionate about, her love for animals," she said.

Maintaining that connection with #BettyWhiteChallenge donors is the main test for animal welfare nonprofits after Monday. □

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RBC Royal Bank Acc. #1330772

Assistant Director

Xiomara Arends

Editors

Liza Koolman (Management assistant)

Richard Brooks

Sales

Linda Reijnders

Sulaika Croes

Classifieds

classified@cspnv.com

Distribution and Collection

accounting@bondia.com

Social / Website

Juan Luis Pinto

Pilar Flores

Columnists

Anthony Croes

Weststraat 22

T: 582-7800

E: news@arubatoday.com

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5 players are unanimous choices for AP's NFL All-Pro Team

By BARRY WILNER

AP Pro Football Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Five players, including dynamic pass catchers Cooper Kupp and Davante Adams, are unanimous choices for The Associated Press 2021 NFL All-Pro Team.

Joining the Rams' Kupp and the Packers' Adams in receiving votes Friday from all 50 members of a nationwide panel of media members who regularly cover the league are Colts running back Jonathan Taylor, Steelers edge rusher T.J. Watt, and Rams defensive tackle Aaron Donald.

While Donald is a perennial pick — the three-time Defensive Player of the Year makes the team for the seventh time in his eight pro seasons — Watt is on it for a third time. He tied the NFL record for sacks with 22 1/2. Adams makes it for the second time, and the other two are newcomers as All-Pros. Kupp led the NFL in receptions (145), yards receiving (1,947) and TD catches (16). Taylor was the top rusher by a landslide with 1,811 yards and scored 18 touchdowns on the ground, two as a receiver.

"Obviously, it's an honor to be recognized, and it wouldn't be possible without my coaches and incredible teammates, but the awards and accolades aren't what drives me," said



Associated Press

Watt, whose Steelers play at Kansas City on Sunday. "It's competing with and for them, this franchise, and this city, that drives me. My coaches and teammates are the people that put me in a position to make splash, help us win, and this recognition honestly doesn't come without them."

Like Donald, although not nearly as often as the offense-wrecking DT, several players are making another appearance on the All-Pro Team. Green Bay quarterback Aaron Rodgers is on for the fourth time, as is Philadelphia center Jason Kelce — one more than his brother, Chiefs' star tight

end Travis. One better than them: Dallas right guard Zack Martin and Baltimore placekicker Justin Tucker at five. Three-time All-Pros are Colts linebacker Darius Leonard, Rams cornerback Jalen Ramsey, and Steelers defensive tackle Cam Heyward. Double All-Pros are Browns edge rusher Myles Garrett and Titans safety Kevin Byard.

The other 14 2021 All-Pros are making their debuts. On offense, 49ers left tackle Trent Williams is a newcomer in his 11th NFL season, joined by Ravens tight end Mark Andrews, Buccaneers right tackle Tristan Wirfs, Browns left guard Joel

Bitonio, and 49ers wide receiver Deebo Samuel. On defense, it's linebackers Micah Parsons of Dallas, the only rookie on the squad, and De'Vondre Campbell of Green Bay; Cowboys cornerback Trevon Diggs; Bills safety Jordan Poyer; and five special teamers: Las Vegas punter A.J. Cole, Jets kick returner Braxton Berrios, Ravens punt returner Devin Duvernay, Saints special teams ace J.T. Gray, and Colts long snapper Luke Rhodes.

Perhaps the most thrilled player is Williams, whose been a stellar blocker for a decade with Washington and now San Francisco,

but never got the All-Pro nod.

"I do feel more comfortable than I've ever felt," he said. "I do feel like I'm as strong as I've ever been. I do feel my football IQ is probably better than it's ever been. As a football player, as a competitor every year you want to be better than the last year. That's my goal and always has been my goal. So if this year is better than last year, I hope so. That's the plan."

Almost as unusual as sweeping the votes is having a rookie on the team. Parsons has been so outstanding he's also considered a strong contender for the Defensive Player of the Year award.

"I think it's an extraordinary honor," he said of being an All-Pro. "It speaks to the work and the position the Cowboys put me in. I think it's just a true blessing. It just makes you want to go harder."

"I think when you achieve things early, you've got to learn how to sustain it. People always say when you get there it gets easier. But I think when you get there, it gets harder. Once you get it, you've got it. But it's hard to sustain it than it is just to get there. I've got to just keep working and keep getting better and find a way to beat this season next year, which is the harder part." □



Associated Press

By DOUG FEINBERG

AP Basketball Writer

Some of the biggest stars in the WNBA could be on the move with free agency set to begin this weekend.

Teams can start talking to their own restricted and unrestricted free agents Satur-

day. Deals can't be officially announced until Feb. 1. Everyone in the league would like to add that player who could lead them to the title like Chicago found last season when Candace Parker decided to return home and help the Sky win

WNBA stars could be on the move as free agency set to begin

the franchise's first WNBA championship.

The combination of new coaches in Phoenix, Las Vegas, New York and Atlanta, along with the amount of available talent, could result in a lot of movement over the next few weeks.

Some of the top unrestricted free agents include Sue Bird, Breanna Stewart and Jewell Loyd of Seattle; Liz Cambage of Las Vegas; Sylvia Fowles of Minnesota; Courtney Williams of Atlanta and Courtney Vandersloot, Allie Quigley and Stefanie Dolson of

Chicago. Former MVP A'ja Wilson is the top restricted free agent, meaning the Aces could match any offer from other teams. She's not expected to leave Las Vegas.

The most likely players to move include Cambage and Williams. Atlanta has already said it won't bring Williams back after she and teammate Crystal Bradford were seen on video throwing punches in a confrontation with a number of women in late May near a food truck in the Atlanta area. The Sky will have tough

choices to make to try and keep their roster together to repeat as WNBA champions.

Chicago already has designated WNBA Finals MVP Kahleah Copper with the franchise tag. League MVP Jonquel Jones was also given the core designation by the Connecticut Sun. Copper, Jones and anyone else who is cored will be given a 1-year super max deal of \$228,094.

Teams have until 5 p.m. ET Friday to inform the league of who they are giving the franchise tag to. □

Hot rivalries spice NFL's wild-card weekend

By **BARRY WILNER**
AP Pro Football Writer

Not only do NFL fans get three night games to savor during wild-card weekend, but they also can revel in the rivalries.

AFC East foes New England and Buffalo, who split victories on the road during the season. NFC West opponents Arizona and the Los Angeles Rams, who also went 1-1 against each other. Plus San Francisco and Dallas rekindling one of the great postseason series of bygone days, particularly in the 1980s and '90s.

"I'm damn fired up, man," Cowboys defensive coordinator Dan Quinn said. "Are you kidding me? The early '90s Dallas-Niners, some of the championship games, for me, coming up and watching those ones, I can hear (John) Madden and (Pat) Summerall talking it through. My first Dallas and Niner playoff game, I'm pretty fired up to do it man. It's exciting."

It's also a difficult matchup to handicap. The Cowboys are the more dynamic side, and the 49ers are the more physical group. Dallas prefers to face opponents



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built more in its image, and San Francisco most definitely isn't. Dallas has some big-time playmakers on defense who will need to clamp down on All-Pro Deebo Samuel, George Kittle and a solid rushing attack. If All-Pro cornerback Trevon Diggs can work his magic with an interception and DeMarcus Lawrence can get pressure on Jimmy Garoppolo, the Cowboys could be in business.

But the Niners are more powerful in the trenches. The 49ers, ranked 10th in the AP Pro32, needed a brilliant rally and overtime against the Rams — talk about archrivals — just to make the playoff field. The No. 5 Cowboys cruised through the NFC East, but have endured enough inconsistency to make you wonder about their staying power. Dallas is a 3 1/2-point favor-

ite at home. Sounds about right.

COWBOYS, 23-20

No. 14 Pittsburgh (plus 12 1/2) at No. 3 Kansas City, Sunday

Even Ben Roethlisberger admits the Steelers are 14th out of 14 playoff teams. The Chiefs might be the best.

BEST BET: CHIEFS, 31-15

No. 11 New England (plus 4) at No. 8 Buffalo, Saturday
There's something unreliable about the Bills this sea-

son, indicating a short play-off stay. Like one game.

UPSET SPECIAL: PATRIOTS, 19-16

No. 12 Las Vegas (plus 5 1/2) at No. 7 Cincinnati, Saturday

Are we the only ones wondering why the Raiders are playing in the first game of the weekend? After such a physically and emotionally exhausting path into the postseason culminating with that wild Sunday night overtime victory against the Chargers? Now traveling east and into the cold weather?

BENGALS, 26-17

No. 13 Philadelphia (plus 8 1/2) at No. 2 Tampa Bay, Sunday

Philly went 0-6 against play-off teams, yet made its way into the playoffs. The 2022 season looks very promising for the Eagles. Sunday does not.

BUCCANEERS, 30-20

No. 9 Arizona (plus 3) at No. 6 Los Angeles Rams, Monday night

The most mystifying of the six contests. If the Cardinals can put pressure on Matthew Stafford, they could pull it off.

RAMS, 20-19

In vaccination battles, pro athletes become proxy players

By **ANDREW DALTON**
AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The pandemic-era saga of tennis star Novak Djokovic in Australia this week is but one of many: Pro athletes who have refused to be vaccinated have been put at center court in a larger contest — as famous faces who are becoming proxy players in the accelerating worldwide cultural battles over COVID jabs.

The NBA's Kyrie Irving missed the first months of the Brooklyn Nets' season before making a partial return. The NFL's Aaron Rodgers went from revered veteran to polarizing figure. And we're still not finished with the diplomatic stand-off and fallout over Djokovic's exemption to play in the Australian Open.

It's a cultural issue, not a question of numbers. The vast majority of players in professional sports organizations are vaccinated — more than the U.S. population at large — and tacitly or explicitly accept the evidence of their safety and efficacy. But the handful of high-profile objectors represent a new front in what one expert calls the "oversized role of sports" in society's conversations.

"We look to sports to give us an answer or clarify issues in the larger culture," says Robert T. Hayashi, an associate professor of American studies at Amherst College in Massachusetts whose specialties include the history of sports. "Many times, the most detailed conversations we see arising in the culture and the media are

regarding sports."

Their centrality is not necessarily because they are exceptional, but because they serve as avatars for all of us.

"They are all different individuals. They have different approaches," says Dan Lebowitz, executive director of the Center for the Study of Sport in Society at Northeastern University. "Athletes," he says, "are no different than really the whole of humanity."

And in that sense, they are subject to the same information and misinformation — the same receptiveness or stubbornness — as the rest of the population.

"We live in a world where we've moved really far away from a central set of facts," Lebowitz says. "None of these athletes are im-



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pervious to all the information that's coming at them around the world, or impervious to the divisions that we have."

While figures like Irving, Rodgers and Djokovic are at the center of the conversation, they may not actually be driving it. COVID vaccines, in their brief existence, have been fast-tracked into an elite group of divisive political and cul-

tural issues — things about which people tend to pick a side and stick to it no matter what.

Mark Harvey, a professor at the University of Saint Mary in Kansas and author of "Celebrity Influence: Politics, Persuasion, and Issue-based Advocacy," says these are the topics on which famous people may actually have the least sway. q

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